

February 15, 2009

Reflection from John Surette, SJ

God's Garden

“The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp.”

In ancient times leprosy was a general term that covered a wide variety of chronic skin diseases. People were ignorant of what caused these conditions and didn't know how to treat them. Those suffering from these ailments were unpleasant to look at, and in some cases repulsive to observe. This unpleasantness and repulsiveness made it easy of people to fear the lepers.

And so a combination of ignorance and of fear resulted in the lepers being driven out of the towns and villages and forced to live in the outskirts or in the wilderness areas. A combination of ignorance and fear prevented people from seeing the inner beauty and the radiance and the godliness of the unfortunate lepers. Within the religious consciousness of the time, they were looked upon as being punished by God for their sins and so they were declared by the religious authorities to be unclean.



In the Gospels, Jesus does not run from the lepers but embraces them. He shows no signs of the ignorance and fear that pervaded the culture of his time.

Much later in history, during the middle of the 14th century, a pandemic disease spread throughout Europe.

The Well

*A Center for our
Sacred Unity with God,
Earth, and One
Another.*

1515 W. Ogden Ave.
LaGrange Park, IL 60526
www.csjthewell.org
thewell@csjoseph.org

It came to be called the “Black Death” or the “Bubonic Plague.” It has been estimated that one-third to one-half of the population died...perhaps some 30 million people.

Today we know that it was spread by a bacteria introduced into the body by the bite of a flea. In the 14th century there was total ignorance as to the cause of the plague and how it spread. Both civil and church authorities were powerless in the face of such massive suffering and devastation. It seemed that civilization and life itself was doomed.

Once again we see here the combination of ignorance and fear, an ignorance and a fear that prevented an entire society from seeing the beauty, the radiance, and the godliness of life. Within the religious consciousness of the time, people thought that they were being punished for their sins.

Within this religious consciousness, people found little or no meaning in their present situation and so there was a tendency to give up on this life and to focus their attention on the next life. There was a tendency to view this life not as a garden within which we needed to be at work attending to its cultivation, but rather as a vale of tears out of which we needed to be redeemed. Some of us to this day continue to say prayers and sing hymns that speak of the vale of tears

Emerging today within our modern religious consciousness, however, is a quite different view. We now are beginning to realize that it is not a matter of escaping from the world but rather of engaging with the world.

We know that Earth is not a vale of tears, though obviously tears have their place within the overall scope of things. Earth is our home where we are invited to live creatively and nurture all those things that make us more fully human. We know that the best preparation for the next life is to live fully in this life, on Earth our home.

We know that from its beginning Earth has been a place where God's Creative Spirit has been at work. We know that we humans are integral members of the Earth and its community of life. We know that we are called to experience the presence and activity of the Spirit in ourselves so that we can become co-creators with the Spirit here on our garden planet Earth.

Earth is the Divine Milieu. Earth is God's playground. Earth is God's workplace. Earth is God's garden. We know that within that garden we are called to live out our lives and increase the amount of justice, peace, and love.

We 21st century Christians are being called to work out our salvation not by being redeemed out of the garden but by pitching our tents firmly within it and being fully engaged in its cultivation!

The Well

*A Center for our
Sacred Unity with
God,
Earth, and One
Another.*

1515 W. Ogden Ave.
LaGrange Park, IL 60526
www.csjthewell.org
thewell@csjoseph.org